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Introduction

Emotional Poverty

What is emotional poverty?
How does it impact your classroom?

Increasingly in schools, educators are dealing with emotional issues, outbursts, violence, rage, anger, avoidance, and anxiety. The current methods of discipline simply are not working very well because they are not addressing emotional issues.

Emotional poverty is not a clinical disorder, and this book doesn't "diagnose" a condition in individuals. The term *emotional poverty* is descriptive of a set of realities that can surface in individuals and in classrooms and that are brought on by home and neighborhood environments.

Emotional poverty occurs when:

- The brain is not integrated or regulated
- The inner self is underdeveloped
- Bonding and attachment is not secure
- The external environment repeatedly reinforces "less than" or "separate from" status

This book explores these concepts and provides understanding, tools, and strategies that are more effective than those currently in use in most classrooms.

Emotional poverty exists in all demographics. When I was the principal of a very affluent elementary school, out of 500 children only five were financially poor. Most of the students were wealthy. However, the level of emotional poverty was high.

Why is emotional poverty such an issue? It promotes behaviors that are less than beneficial to the students themselves and to everyone around them. It can make people feel “less than” and “separate from” all of their lives. No matter how successful people in emotional poverty may be, their internal understanding is that they are never enough. Emotional poverty is subtle and unnamed. It impacts personal relationships, performance, and parenting throughout an adult’s life.

So-called “deficit models” focus on something being wrong with individual people. This book seeks to identify deficits in the environment, places where resources weren’t available for brain integration and regulation, secure bonding and attachment, and development of a robust inner self. Deficits also apply to environments.

Psychology frames this as a continuum of normality, but schools often separate out people who do not fit the norm. Furthermore, often deficits in the individuals are seen, but not deficits in the environment. Punishment only deepens the emotional poverty, often baffling educators when students return with violence. The school may say, “We are not responsible for the individual’s emotional well-being,” but the truth of the matter is that schools are responsible for the safety of all their students, and that includes the emotional well-being of students who are at risk.

After the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School installed all kinds of security devices. They even made students wear see-through backpacks, but those kids didn’t feel safe.

Some schools will say, “Your emotional poverty approach is too soft on the students. We need to use the broken windows theory and police every minor discipline infraction.” The problem is that the broken windows approach does not make schools safer. Environments create emotional poverty, and emotional poverty motivates bad behavior. We need to motivate good behavior.

Consequences will always be needed. It is the approach that changes.

The mission of this book is to change the conceptual frame from “those are bad kids” and “they did that on purpose.” Bad behavior actually comes from an unintegrated and unregulated brain, a weak inner self, and an insecure bonding and attachment style, as well as external reinforcements that indicate you are “less than” and “separate from.”

It is possible to motivate good behavior.

As a side note, some problems and issues can be solved, but some can only be managed. When an issue or problem can only be managed, then the management process will require constant correction and adaptation.

A letter from Gary Rudick, former chief of Tulsa Public Schools Campus Police and current member of the Oklahoma Commission on School Security:

I've been teaching school safety and security since I was chief of Tulsa Public Schools Campus Police, and I now teach it across the country. This is an area I can speak to with some degree of authority.

Developing a positive school culture and environment is the most important thing. When we talk to kids, they tell us that the thing that makes them feel safest is not metal detectors, fences, armed guards, drug dogs, or moats with alligators. It's whether or not there is a culture of belonging, of connection, of appreciation—that there is someone here who cares about whether or not I succeed, whether or not I attend school at all, whether or not I have friends there, etc.

A culture of connection and acceptance means more to the atmosphere of safety and security than any single issue. After the Parkland, Florida, shooting, students across the nation were interviewed by media about what they thought of their own schools' safety. Students who thought their own school was safe often followed that up with, "I feel like people care about me here, and we care about each other."

Caring and mutual respect is a consistent theme in developing a safe school environment. That starts with education professionals who demonstrate a caring, nonjudgmental atmosphere. Look at the vast majority of school shootings, and you find a kid who slipped off the grid months before, isolated, alone, desperate, and moving toward revenge or to make a statement.

When I teach educators about school safety, one of the first questions I ask is:

"If you can describe in one single word what most of your kids' emotional state is, or what they typically display as the most consistent emotion, what would that one word be?"

The most frequent answer? Anger.

Kids are angry, and when you ask why they are so angry, the most common response is, "I don't know." This book, *Emotional Poverty*, can help students understand where anger comes from and why it is not

altogether a bad thing; it just needs to be identified, studied, and managed. And sometimes kids have very good reasons to be mad.

I had a kid about 13 brought to my office who had been arrested for pushing a teacher. He was mad. He wouldn't talk at all or answer questions. He sat in my office so long that I got hungry, and I asked him if he was hungry too. He finally said yes, so I went to the cafeteria and got us both something to eat.

We ate in total silence until he finally asked, "Did you hear what happened to my brother?"

I had. His brother was killed in a drive-by shooting about 10 days prior, right in the family's front yard. I asked him, "Where were you when that happened?"

He replied, "I was in my bed."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Do? Man, I jumped out the window and ran," he said.

"Where did you run to?" I asked.

"I didn't have no place to go. I just ran."

Throughout my life there have been times when I was afraid, but I have never been so scared that I ran from my house half naked at 3 a.m. with no safe place to go. But this kid had experienced that. And then just a few days later, we wanted him to sit in class, turn to page 35 in his math book, and solve equations.

When he couldn't get through it, he tried to leave the classroom. The teacher objected and tried to block his exit by standing in front of the door. He pushed her out of the way to get out of the room, and that was enough to get him handcuffs, an arrest record, and an automatic, statutory, six-month suspension from school.

We never saw him return to school again.

It's important that we not judge kids who are mad when we don't know what they are mad about. If we seek to punish before we understand, we only reinforce the bad behavior.

Most active shooters in schools, if not the majority of active shooters in public spaces, have striking similarities across the board. Many of those similarities are discussed in this book.

Let's start with students whose inner selves are underdeveloped, who are emotionally needy, and who exhibit destructive behavior. We see this as a precursor to those who eventually lash out in violence. The concept of "victimology" takes control of the individual. They think to themselves: *Everyone sees me as a victim and weak, but I will show you. I am not going to be remembered that way. You are going to remember me for the fear I put into your life.*

We see similar characteristics in many shooters as they move from the fantasy stage of violence (video games, drawings, essays on violence), to actual planning (gathering the weapons), to preparation (practice with weapons), and eventual implementation.

As a side note, students whose inner selves are underdeveloped are also the most targeted by pedophiles, particularly by educators who are predators. They see these kids as the most vulnerable and use their positions to gain the trust of the victim and the victim's parent or guardian (usually a single mom), and eventually they make the child a victim of their criminal intent. Add to this the fact that special-needs kids and students of color are at a disproportionately higher rate of risk, and we get a good picture of who we need to be watching out for as high-risk targets for sexual abuse by educators.

After the Columbine shooting in Colorado, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service joined to conduct a series of studies on school violence and came out with the Safe School Initiative report.¹ That report emphasizes the need for behavioral threat assessment processes in schools, but most schools argue they don't have the resources to commit to the process. Even among those schools that do a threat assessment, most do not do follow up once a student is suspended.

Everyone thinks suspension is the "endgame," but it is not. First, there is still the risk that the suspended student will return to the school before the suspension is over (often because they are hungry and the school cafeteria is the only place they can get something to eat). Second, after the suspension, the student is going to return to school. How do we monitor students while they are out of school, and how do we assimilate students back into the culture successfully? Even when a threat assessment is in place, those plans for reintegration are usually left out.

As this book advocates, we do need better triage processes to both identify and serve students who are potential risks for violence, but schools need funding for these efforts. Funds to provide monitoring outside school

hours would help too. If parents can't help, we can't expect kids to get well on their own. Many parents want to do something but don't know how or where to turn. After-hours support could help that.

A less expensive procedure to implement is having just one point of entry to a school. Every morning, have as many teachers and staff members as possible present to greet students at the door. This low- to no-cost process is actually a method of behavior assessment and observation. Teachers and staff watch kids as they exit the cars and buses: What is the interaction between parent and child? What is the interaction between a given student and other students? How do students greet you when you speak to them? What are they wearing? How is their appearance? Do they appear sleepy, withdrawn, sullen, angry? All of these things can be observed and used to assess the potential for high-risk, violent behavior. Students who eat alone and remain alone in common areas are often the ones teachers need to reach out to.

The bottom line here is that assessing risk and potential threats before the student becomes violent is important, and that creating a caring school culture can help eliminate some of those risks from developing in the first place. The first challenge is to get schools to create that culture of caring and mutual respect. The second challenge is for schools to adopt a behavioral threat assessment process and to remain faithful to it—even when things are going well and there are no students who seem to be immediate threats. I am currently studying the possibility of creating threat assessment teams to support schools, particularly rural schools without significant resources. Many smaller districts simply don't have the resources to pull a team together.

But every district and every school has the resources to develop a culture of caring and support, and that's the front line in preventing school violence.

What can you do to develop a school culture that prevents violence? One way to start is by identifying the emotional resources of your students. Think of a student you have in your classroom or building right now, and complete the following checklist for that student.

Checklist for identifying emotional resources

| | | |
|---|-----|----|
| Controls impulsivity most of the time | Yes | No |
| Can plan for behavior to complete assignments | Yes | No |
| Controls anger | Yes | No |
| Has positive self-talk | Yes | No |
| Sees the relationship between choice and consequence | Yes | No |
| Can usually resolve a problem with words (does not hit or become verbally abusive) | Yes | No |
| Can argue without vulgarity or profanity | Yes | No |
| Can predict outcomes based on cause and effect | Yes | No |
| Can separate the behavior (criticism) from the person (contempt) | Yes | No |
| Usually has the words to name feelings | Yes | No |
| Can use the adult voice | Yes | No |
| Has parents who are supportive of school | Yes | No |
| Has at least two caring and nurturing adults | Yes | No |
| Has at least two friends (peers) who are nurturing and not destructive | Yes | No |
| Belongs to a peer group; can be racial, cultural, religious, activity-based (e.g., sports, music, academics), etc. | Yes | No |
| Is involved in one or more school activities (sports, music, theater, chess club, etc.) | Yes | No |
| Is good at making new friends (social capital) | Yes | No |
| Has at least two friends who are different from self (by race, culture, interest, academics, religion, etc.) | Yes | No |
| Is a mentor or a friend to whom others come for advice | Yes | No |
| Has at least two people who will be advocates | Yes | No |
| Is connected to a larger social network (bridging social capital—e.g., church, 4-H, Boys and Girls Club, soccer league, country club, etc.) | Yes | No |
| Student can identify at least one group to which student belongs | Yes | No |
| Has at least one teacher or coach who knows student personally and will be an advocate | Yes | No |
| Has at least one adult who is the primary support system for the household | Yes | No |

Adapted from *Under-Resourced Learners: Eight Strategies to Boost Student Achievement* by R. K. Payne